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## **Identity Work and Organizational Identification**

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# **Identity Work and Organizational Identification**

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I analyse five approaches to identity work - discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, and psychodynamic - and show how these are helpful in exploring the ways people draw on their membership of organizations in their constructions of self, processes generally referred to as organizational identification. Collectively, these approaches constitute a distinctive perspective on identities and identifications which suggests that they are 'worked on' by embedded social actors who are both constrained and enabled by context. In so doing, I draw attention to issues of agency and process, the always dynamic and complex, often fractured, and sometimes contradictory nature of identities and identifications, and raise a series of issues and questions for further research.

## Introduction

Despite considerable attention being paid to individual-level processes of identity construction in organizations, much of it centred on the concept *identity work*, what constitutes identity work is under-explored (Brown 2015, p. 17). In this paper, I analyse five approaches to identity work - discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, and psychodynamic - and show how these aid understanding of the ways people draw on their membership of organizations in their constructions of self, processes generally referred to as *organizational identification*. This is potentially useful for two primary reasons. First, it serves to divert attention away from a single dominant paradigm associated with Social Identity Theory/Self Categorization Theory (SIT/SCT) in organizational identification research, and permits focus on the multiple means by which individuals construe their selves in relation to their organizations. Second, it facilitates recognition that, arguably, these often interrelated approaches collectively constitute a distinctive perspective on identities and identifications which emphasizes that they are ‘worked on’ by embedded social actors who are both constrained and enabled by context. This is important because it clarifies that phenomena referred to under the umbrella ‘organizational identification’ are best regarded as processes of identity work.

Identification in organizations, most often conceived as the extent to which an individual perceives unity between him or her-self and a collective, has caught the imagination of scholars (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Edwards 2005; He and Brown 2013). Researchers concerned with organizational identification increasingly recognize, in principle, that it refers not just to a state but to multiple simultaneously occurring and inter-related dynamic processes as people continuously reassess and revise their relationships with the organizations to which they belong (Albert *et al.* 2000; Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Atewologun *et al.* 2017; Cornelissen *et al.* 2007; Coupland 2001; Haslam 2004; Hogg and Terry 2000, 2001; Oakes *et al.* 1994). This said, even

though SIT/SCT theorists acknowledge that identification relationships can be dynamic, yet ‘empirical work to date [using this approach] has largely ignored this possibility’ (Miscenko and Day 2016, p. 230). My integrative project, which highlights distinctive ‘worked on’ approaches to identification, is valuable in part because most studies are conducted by scholars fixated on SIT/SCT. The dangers associated with this myopia have been admirably commented upon by Ashforth (2016):

‘I believe that SIT/SCT may have been *too* successful. My concern is that the more SIT/SCT is seen to dominate the quantitative OB literature on identity and identification, the more SIT/SCT assumes the institutional force of a paradigm, as if identity/identification questions can only – and *should* only – be addressed via SIT/SCT’ (p. 368, emphasis in original).

Recognition of multiple approaches to identity work and processes of organizational identification both brings clarity to a confused and confusing literature, and highlights issues for research that may prove generative. Scholarship on identities in organizations is not only amnesic and myopic (Clarke and Knights 2017) but, as Alvesson *et al.* (2008, p. 9) have argued, ‘largely disconnected’, and there is a requirement for ‘a more engaged conversation across metatheoretical lenses’.

In studies of identities in and around organizations, identity work has emerged as a key explanatory concept (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Brown 2015; Snow and Anderson 1987; Watson 2009; Ybema *et al.* 2009). Referring to those means by which individuals fashion both immediately situated and longer-term understandings of their selves, identity work is central to a broad range of individual and collective phenomena (Clegg and Baumeler 2010; Corlett *et al.* 2015; Petriglieri and Stein 2012). Its importance stems from the emphasis it places on ‘the *experience* of agency’ (Gecas 1986, p. 140, emphasis in original) and the opportunities it offers analysts to investigate the role of micro-processes in the production of macro-consequences. As such, it is symptomatic of what Phillips and Lawrence (2012, p. 223, p. 224) refer to as ‘the turn to work in organization and management theory’ in which the term ‘work’ has been

combined with various other words and phrases to focus on ‘...actors’ efforts to affect a social symbolic aspect of their context’. The phrase identity work is, however, generally under-specified; in much research it is referred to only implicitly, and some studies employ multiple distinct conceptions of it (Brown 2015). Building on recognition that identification is an emergent process of identity formation (Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Scott *et al.* 1998, p. 304) I outline five approaches to identity work; concomitantly, I demonstrate how they have been used to both inform theory development and to guide empirical studies of how people relate to social categories (i.e. identification work) focusing in particular on organizational identification.

The aims of this article are threefold. First, the concept *identity work* is explored. Second, five distinct but overlapping and interrelated approaches to identity work and organizational identification - discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, and psychodynamic - are outlined. Third, I discuss a number of key issues and questions raised by this review relating to how processes of identity work and identification are best theorized and researched. Inspired by what Toulmin (1990) refers to as an ‘ecological style’ of thinking which embraces complexity, this theorizing attends to the interrelatedness of things and ideas, shows how traditional conceptions may fetter progress, and is offered to promote new ways of thinking and conversing about identity work and organizational identification.

## **Methodology**

The literature on identity and identification ‘is increasingly vast, heterogeneous, and fragmented’ with a growth rate in publications of over 600% over the last 20 years (Miscenko and Day, 2016, p.221). In keeping with other review papers, to identify published output relevant to my concerns I utilized a protocol-driven methodology together with a ‘snowballing’ approach (Greenhalgh and Peacock 2005)<sup>i</sup>. I first employed Thomson Reuters Web of Science

(Social Science) database to identify those papers published in business and management journals that used the terms/phrases ‘identity/identities’ (2384 papers) and ‘identity work’ (203 papers) in their titles. Subsequently, I also searched for ‘organizational identification’ (plus variants) in the titles of all social sciences journals (241 papers)<sup>ii</sup>. No paper included the phrases ‘identity work’ and ‘organizational identification’ in its title, though some papers did explicitly include mention of both phrases in their text. From this library I identified those papers that were either well cited or recently published and which made a substantive contribution to research on either identity work or organizational identification. The lists of references in prominent articles were used to discover books, book chapters and further journal papers that merited inclusion. As this substantial collection of texts was accumulated I subjected it to systematic analysis, often reading each work multiple times, and taking extensive notes on them which were compiled in Word files.

Several approaches to coding this material were taken. In the first instance, I collected together texts associated with identity work. As the files containing this material developed I began to refine them into different categories associated with various debates (e.g., coherence-fragmentation, stability-instability, construct-metaphor etc.). Increasingly, it became apparent that authors were either explicitly or implicitly adopting different approaches to the study of identity work, and that the distinctions between them and their implications were mostly being ignored. It also became clear that while ostensibly pertaining to identities, much of this literature also concerned identification. Over a period of more than two years I eventually arrived at the five broad approaches to identity work and identification that feature in this paper. Concomitantly, the literature on organizational identification was also subjected to analysis. It very soon became palpable that mainstream theorising centred on SIT/SCT did not overlap greatly with that on subjectively construed identities and identity work. Over time, I came to

recognize that socio-cognitive approaches to organizational identification, especially those which emphasized the choices people make regarding the categories they claim for themselves, might be regarded as describing forms of identity work, and sought to integrate this literature into my emerging analytical framework. To be clear, although identity work was always a focus for my research, the five approaches to it and organizational identification that feature here emerged from processes of analysis and reflection.

## **Identity Work and Identification**

### *Identity Work*

Associated with the rise to prominence of *identities* in organizations and the processes of their formation, identity work is a concept whose time has come (Alvesson 2010; Baumeister 1986; Brown, 2015; Coupland and Brown 2012; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2008; Winkler, 2016). Although sometimes also referred to by cognates such as *identity construction* (Pratt 2012), *identity quests* (Turner 1975), *bricolage* (Visscher *et al.* 2017) and *identity projects* (Giddens 1991), it is the phrase *identity work* that has achieved widespread acceptance within organization and management studies and is employed occasionally in broader social science literatures (Callero 2003; Cohen and Taylor 1978; Snow and Anderson 1987). It denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources. People are now commonly depicted as ‘intelligent strategist[s]’ (Giddens 1994, p. 7) who negotiate their (increasingly individuated) selves as they adapt to the vicissitudes of late modern organizational life (Gergen 1991). This trend has been accompanied by widespread recognition that identities are not one-off accomplishments, but actively and often self-consciously constructed in social contexts, and ‘require repeated work to be sustained’ (Anteby 2008, p. 203). Still burgeoning, this



literature is both ‘characterized by a rich diversity of approaches’ and features a multitude of seemingly irreconcilable debates (Brown 2015, p.24).

While there is consensus that identity work refers to the interlinked activities by which individuals create, maintain, repair, display, revise and discard social, personal and role identities, nevertheless there is little agreement on fundamental issues (Alvesson *et al.* 2008; Owens *et al.* 2010; Ybema *et al.* 2009). One important set of debates centres on whether ‘identity work’ denotes a concept, a construct, a metaphor, a perspective or some combination of these. Uncertainty on these matters is fuelled by the fact that much theorising on identity matters, and many empirical studies, lack clarity in their use of the phrase. Most frequently, identity work has been regarded as a concept, and is best known through the definitions of Snow and Anderson (1987), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Watson (2008). Brown (2015, p.25) notes that some scholarship has adopted a realist ontology and employed identity work ‘as an empirical “construct”’ but prefers to describe it as a ‘linguistic metaphor’ useful in the analysis of identities construction. This is consonant with considerable theorizing in the social sciences which suggests that metaphors are a key mode of thought and analysis, and is the position I adopt here (Pepper 1942; Haslam *et al.* 2017). Taken as a whole, the literature on identity work might also reasonably be viewed as a distinctive perspective on identities construction, which emphasizes agency and processual issues, but which includes within its broad ambit scholars working with multiple (perhaps not always fully compatible) assumptions, frameworks and methods.

Uncertainty regarding the ontological and epistemological status of ‘identity work’ helps to explain a number of disagreements among scholars. For example, it is uncertain whether identity work activities are best regarded as tacit or explicit, palpable or subtle, clear or

ambiguous, intentional or habitual, conscious or unconscious. There is dissensus on the extent to which these processes are undertaken to broker competing demands for individuation and social belonging, and/or to mitigate identity dysfunctions. There is disagreement whether identity work occurs continuously or is generally confined to periods of intense activity when people must deal with perceived identity disruptions or reconcile contradictions (such as occur during job role changes). Scholars contest the extent to which identity work is engaged in by individuals for the benefit of an internal audience (e.g., to support the self) or undertaken most importantly in relation to significant others who variously grant, validate, question, cast doubt, and ignore them, and whose responses shape and condition such work on an on-going basis. Finally, opinions differ regarding people's scope for agency and self-creation, and indeed whether all such identity work is co-opted or colonized either by external agents for their own purposes or directed by historical and cultural forces beyond any person's or group's control.

Significantly, identity work, which was once seen as having only 'vague' influence (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, p. 625), is now recognized to be implicated in a host of individual and collective processes and outcomes. Identities, and the work which supports them, are instrumental in cueing actors' thoughts, feelings and actions in situated contexts (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Theorists now acknowledge identity work as pivotal in processes of internal organizational legitimacy (Brown and Toyoki 2013), entrepreneurship, and means through which institutional change can be effected or blocked (Creed *et al.* 2010; Leung *et al.* 2013; Lok 2010; McGivern *et al.* 2015). Those interested in individual-organization relations have shown how identity work is salient in processes of control (Anteby 2008), functions to promote and to undermine processes of socialization (Ibarra 1999) and organizational Englishization (Boussebaa and Brown 2017), is employed by those responding to workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik 2008) and engaged in by those making retirement decisions (Vough

*et al.* 2015). Identity work in pursuit of positive work-related identities has been theorized as important in explanations of individuals' abilities to deal with adversity and stress, creativity and adaptation to new settings, satisfaction and enjoyment (Dutton *et al.* 2010). The role of identity work has also been explored in people's internalization of leadership roles (DeRue *et al.* 2009) and strategist identities (Laine *et al.* 2016). Most germane for my purposes, identity work has been discussed explicitly in relation to identification (Pratt 2000) and allied topics such as commitment (Petriglieri 2011).

### *Organizational Identification*

There is no single, universally accepted definition of organizational identification (cf. Edwards 2005; He and Brown, 2013). One widely accepted view is that organizational identification is an alignment between individual and collective identities, resulting in a sense of unity between the person and their organization, and the description of the self and collective in similar terms (Gutierrez *et al.* 2010). As Ashforth *et al.* (2008) have shown, at their narrowest definitions of organizational identification construe it merely cognitively, for example as '...the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate' (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p. 21; Dutton *et al.* 1994, p. 239; Pratt 1998, p. 172-4). Less restricted versions suggest that identification refers to the extent to which an organization defines the self and the individual's view of the world, and involves evaluation of the meaning of organizational membership in which values and emotions figure (Tajfel 1982, p. 2; cf. Haslam 2004; Oakes *et al.* 1994). These broader conceptions emphasize that identification with an organization means accepting a range of collective goals, beliefs and values, stereotypic traits, behaviours, knowledge and skills 'as one's own' (Ashforth *et al.* 2008, p. 330) and embodying them to become prototypical of it (Elsbach 2004; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

While attention has often focused on *identification* (an active and positive connection between the self and organization), many different individual-collective relationships have been described, including *dis-identification* (an active and negative connection between the self and organization), *schizo-identification* (simultaneous identification and dis-identification with different aspects of an organization), *neutral identification* (a self-perception of impartiality with respect to an organization), and *split identification* (identification with ‘normative’ aspects and dis-identification with organizational failings) (Gutierrez *et al.* 2010; Elsbach 1999; Lemmergard and Muhr 2012)<sup>iii</sup>. There is broad recognition that individuals have multiple work identifications, some of which are embedded or nested (e.g. job, department, organization), and others of which cross-cut these boundaries (such as union membership and friendship groups) (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Atowologun *et al.* 2017; Haslam 2004). Scholars tend often to distinguish between those identifications which are transient and situation-specific, and those which are deeper, more stable and involve fundamental connections between the self and a collective (Rousseau 1998). Moreover, it is generally appreciated that both selves and organizations may harbour multiple, hybrid or fragmented identities making the analysis of patterns of identification in practice a non-trivial task (cf. Haslam *et al.* 2014; Rijswijk *et al.* 2006).

Some theorizing suggests that identification relationships are relatively stable because people hold consistent motives for self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-coherence, self-distinctiveness, safety, affiliation and uncertainty reduction that anchor them to organizations (Cooper and Thatcher 2010). Indeed, in their recent review, Miscenko and Day (2016, p.230) found ‘few studies that considered organizational identification as a dynamic construct’ and argued that this was because of ‘the overwhelming influence of the social identity theory’ which has ‘left the domain relatively static’. Increasingly, however, it has become clear that identification is

not a passive condition but an activity, and that people's relationships with organizations are rarely well-defined but instead confused, inconsistent, and unstable (Cheney 1983; Millward *et al.* 2007). Kreiner *et al.* (2006b), for example, have drawn attention to the boundary dynamics that occur between individual and organizational identities. Such analyses have led to calls for scholars to move beyond 'snapshot images of identification' (Ashforth *et al.* 2008, p. 340), to seek understanding of the 'subtleties and complexities of...identification and disidentification' (Pratt 1998, p. 200), and to explore 'how identification waxes and wanes as individuals and their contexts evolve' (Kreiner *et al.* 2006a, p. 1032). These calls have most often been associated with conceptions of identification as a social accomplishment involving a series of reciprocal interactions between individuals and collectives that occur as individuals manage their identities to align (or de-align, etc.) with them (Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Gutierrez *et al.* 2010; Kuhn and Nelson 2002).

When regarded as a verb rather than a noun identification becomes '...the process of emerging identity' (Scott *et al.* 1998, p. 304) on which both day-to-day and whole life experiences impinge, and which is not just fluid but, at least potentially, ambiguous and contested (Hoyer, 2016). Identification is 'continuously enacted and reenacted' (Pratt 2000, p. 476) in processes of 'becoming' with no possibility of final closure (Ashforth 1998; Haslam 2004), and is a 'compelling construct' because it not only 'roots the individual in the organization' but 'reflects a fundamental and visceral connection that other attachment constructs lack' (Ashforth *et al.* 2008 p. 359). Drawing on the literature on identities in organizations, I outline distinct though overlapping and interleaved approaches to identity work, and illustrate how they emphasize different aspects of identification processes. Identification, I argue, is an enactment with consequences (Weick 1979) that may be accomplished through words, deeds, or other symbols,

and can occur consciously, for example, through sensemaking, or sub-consciously as a result of psychodynamic processes.

## **Approaches to Identity Work and Identification**

Here I focus on five principal approaches to (and associated forms of) identity work and organizational identification - discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, and psychodynamic (see Table 1). While researchers tend most often to work with one or a few primary approaches, these are far from discrete, and the processes they implicate are in practice often simultaneous, overlapping and interlinked. Regarded as components of a single 'perspective', inspired by the 'turn to work', and focused on 'what organizational actors are doing, why they are doing it and with what consequences' (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012, p. 228), one possibility is that deliberate combined use of multiple approaches might permit greater appreciation of the multifaceted, interconnected ways in which identities are worked on and identification enacted, and this may have potential to encourage more broad-ranging theorizing and richer empirical research. Of course, not all identity work is concerned with identification. People engage in much identity work that is to do with the creation of symbolic resources or culture (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, p. 121), focused solely on their personal identities (Cassell, 2005), or connected with organizations in other ways, creating, maintaining and disrupting them. The analysis offered here (generally) ignores these forms of identity work and concentrates on that which enacts social (mostly organizational but also group and professional) identification (see Atewologun *et al.* 2017 for a discussion of the many foci of identification in work contexts).

**Table 1**

**Approaches to Identity Work and Identification Processes**

<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Overview</b>	<b>Exemplary Literature</b>
Discursive	Identities and identification processes are constituted through situated practices of language use	Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) Alvesson <i>et al.</i> (2008) Cheney (1983) Kreiner <i>et al.</i> (2006) Ybema <i>et al.</i> (2009)
Dramaturgical	Identities and identification processes are constituted through actions (performances of the self)	Anteby (2010) Coupland (2015) Goffman (1959) Courpasson and Monties (2016) Trethewey (1999)
Symbolic	Identities and identification processes are constituted through the adoption, display and manipulation of object symbols	Casey (1995) De Beauvoir (1949) Humphreys and Brown (2002b) Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) Shankar, Elliott and Fitch (2006)
Socio-Cognitive	Identities and identification processes are constituted through cognitive mechanisms and/or through sensemaking	Ashforth and Mael (1989) Haslam (2004) Tajfel (1982) Tajfel and Turner (1986) Weick (1979)
Psychodynamic	Identities and identification processes are constituted through the operation of unconscious ego defences	Freud, A. (1936) Freud, S. (1922) Fraher and Gabriel (2014) Hoyer and Steyaert (2015) Schwartz (1987)

### *Discursive*

*Identity work.* This approach to identity work focuses on identities as constituted through situated practices of language use, with recent scholarly attention focusing mostly on *narrative* and/or *dialogical* processes of self-authorship (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Alvesson and Robertson 2016; Ashcraft 2007; Bardon *et al.* 2015; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008; Clarke and Knights 2015; Koernes 2014; Mallet and Wapshott 2015; McInnes and Corlett 2012; Tracy and Naughton 1994; Tracy *et al.* 2006). Researchers from across the social sciences have theorized that self-narratives - internalized, dynamic, and not necessarily fully coherent - are both an expression, and constitutive, of identity (MacIntyre 1981; McAdams 1993; Ricoeur 1984). For Bruner (1987, p. 15) the ‘self is a perpetually rewritten story...in the end we become the autobiographical narratives that we tell about our lives’; Sacks (1985, p. 121) maintains that ‘each of us constructs and lives a “narrative” and this narrative is us, our identities’; while for Gergen (1999, p. 70) ‘we identify ourselves through narration’. These discursive identities are most often theorized as being formed in relation to significant others through dialogical processes, including both internal soliloquy and conversational partners (Athens 1994; Beech 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). That is, selves are ‘relational’ discursive fabrications enacted linguistically through relationships in which the ‘self’ is distinguished from the ‘other’, in fluid, multi-vocal, social situations (Webb 2006).

*Identification.* In this approach, organizational identification is enacted through discursive practices, i.e. talking and writing (e.g. Chreim 2002; Ellis and Ybema 2010; O’Toole and Grey 2015, 2016). Kunda (1992, p. 171) quotes a manager who claimed that ‘I’ll never leave Tech. I am a Techie’, while Toffler and Reingold (2003) report Arthur Andersen employees turning up at rallies chanting ‘I am Andersen’. Articulations of (mostly strong but also sometimes ambivalent) occupational identification have been analysed among Episcopal priests (Kreiner



*et al.* 2006a), service professionals (Costas and Fleming 2009) and primary care physicians (Pratt *et al.*, 2006). Consider, for instance, the strong-identification statement of an Episcopal priest that ‘The human Tom and the priest are so intertwined generally that I cannot separate them’ (Kreiner *et al.* 2006a, p. 1031). Studies have shown how strong organizational identification is enacted by demonstrating fluency in an organization’s ideology (Kunda 1992), the appropriate use of humour (Huber and Brown, 2017) or by repeating stock phrases about a corporation’s supposed ‘inventive genius’ and ‘business acumen’ (Casey 1995, p. 95). More hesitant and undecided avowals of organizational identification have been examined among Amway distributors (Pratt 2000), middle managers (Watson 1994), and Port Authority employees (Dutton *et al.* 1994). People, it seems, may discursively manage a variety of identification relationships (both positive and negative) with their organizations (Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Hirst and Humphreys 2013, 2015; Toyoki and Brown 2014; Tracey and Phillips 2016).

Mostly, scholars have commented on how identification is accomplished through continuously evolving ‘accounts’, especially ‘self-narratives’, such that ‘The story we tell ourselves ...is the essence of identification’ (Scott *et al.* 1998, p. 305). Casey (1995, p. 174) comments on how those she refers to as ‘passive colluders’ with the Hephaestus Corporation enacted identification through ‘...repetition of the official cultural narratives’. The role of dialogue as a means of both securing and enacting organizational identification has also been attended to. Lofland and Stark (1965), for instance, report how the converts to a small millenarian cult, called the ‘Divine Precepts’, spent much of their time discussing ‘the necessity of supporting the cause in every way’ (p.873), and how these conversations were not just enactments of identification but led those not yet fully committed to become ‘increasingly engrossed... until they came to give it [the cult] all their personal and material resources’ (p.874). Other studies

have shown how organizational identification is enacted through dialogues centred on ‘ethical living’ at a small charitable organization (Kenny 2010), and the notionally elite status of management consultants (Karreman and Alvesson 2004) and paratroopers (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). More micro studies have focused on individuals’ specific discursive practices including irony, metaphor, and cynicism to construe their often highly nuanced and mutable forms of attachment to, and distance from, their organizations (Kosmala and Herrbach 2006; Costas and Fleming 2009).

### *Dramaturgical*

*Identity work.* This approach suggests that identity work involves a broad range of dramaturgical actions and interactions in social settings, generally for external audiences, which ‘announce and enact’ who people are (Creed and Scully 2000, p. 391; Down and Reveley, 2009; Goffman 1990 [1959]; Mangham 1990)<sup>iv</sup>. As Thatcher and Zhu (2006, p. 1085) assert, ‘behaviorally enacting an identity constitutes an essential dimension of identity, since it is only through repeated enactment that identity is sustained’. Actors construe their identities in their choice of locations for informal encounters and formal meetings, whose company to keep and who to avoid, eye contact, and the adoption of physical postures and facial expressions (Burke 1969a,b; Goffman 1990 [1959])<sup>v</sup>. Identity work involving emotional displays, generally referred to as ‘emotional labour’, is often a key aspect of identity dramaturgy (Hochschild 1983; Winkler 2016). Considerable research has centred on how gendered identities are performed through specific modes of etiquette, manners, comportment, gestures, walking, sitting and working (Corlett and Mavin 2014; Patriotta and Spedale 2009; Trethewey 1999). Other research highlights specific categories of behaviour in identity performances such as embodiments and felt bodily experiences (Aslan 2016; Cunliffe and Coupland 2012), observation (Ibarra 1999), and habitual routines (Brown and Lewis, 2011;

Thatcher and Zhu 2006). Studies suggest also that specialized identities, for example chess players (Leifer 1988), cooks, (Fine 1996), accountants (Grey, 1998), police officers (Courpasson and Monties, 2016), rugby players (Brown and Coupland, 2015), military personnel (Godfrey et al. 2012) and funeral home directors (Barley 1983), may call for the enactment of highly specific, learned repertoires of behaviour (cf. Beech *et al.* 2016).

*Identification.* Dramaturgically, organizational identification is often clearly enacted through long hours, hard work (Coser 1974; Kuhn 2006), and the passionate conduct of key work activities (Coupland 2015; Kachtan and Wasserman 2015; Pratt 2000). Studies have shown how organizational identification can be constructed through the consumption of particular kinds of food (Kenny 2010), prayer (Gutierrez *et al.* 2010; Giorgi and Palmsano 2017), collaboration in formal research projects (Davenport and Dallenbach 2011), and ‘voluntary’ subordination and obedience (Karreman and Alvesson 2004). Anteby (2010) describes how craftsmen at AeroDyn enacted their identification with particular occupations (e.g. coppersmith, blacksmith, welder, fitter) by performing skilled manual work and in particular by producing ‘homers’ (artifacts intended for personal use or as gifts). Identification with certain professions and organizations is also constituted by individuals’ nonparticipation in some behaviours: priests refrain from swearing, speeding, and both playful and overbearing behaviours (Kreiner *et al.* 2006a), while members of utopian cults may enact identification through celibacy or by abstaining from activities such as smoking, drinking, dancing and reading (Kanter 1968). Other forms of (e.g., neutral and dis) identification are also enacted dramaturgically, for instance, by physically staying away from an organization, or leaving for home at the earliest opportunity (Humphreys and Brown 2002a).

Much strong positive identification dramaturgy is enacted through organizational rituals; indeed, participation in ritual can induce people to become what they at first sought merely to appear (Mills 1940, p. 908). Rituals are conventionalized actions, disciplined rehearsals of ‘correctly’ articulated behaviours; they are also dramatic representations of social order in which individuals enact organizationally aligned versions of their selves (Bell 1992). For example, members of utopian cults enact their organizational identification through purifying rituals such as singing hymns and communalistic labour (Kanter 1968) and through strict adherence to daily programmes of highly specified activities (Webber 1959). At Hephaestus, Casey (1995, p. 119-121) observed ritualized team meetings which were lengthy, arduous and intense, and in which few people actually spoke, but which were, arguably, manifestations of participants’ identification both with the company and its products. Organizational identification, though, is rarely total and rituals are occasions for enacting diverse forms of identification. Kunda (1992, p. 92) described life at Tech as being ‘replete with ritual’, but also how some people ignored set-piece speeches and others left early, while rituals centred on meals tended to be accompanied by more playful behaviour and the parodying of conventions; thus did employees perform various nuanced forms of organizational identification.

### *Symbolic*

*Identity work.* This approach highlights the identity work which occurs through individuals’ adoption, display and manipulation of often highly visible and malleable object symbols, i.e. tangible entities that are infused with meaning (Goffman 1990 [1959]; Pfeffer 1981). Most attention has focussed on people’s use of physical objects, and the symbolic work associated directly with the human body (Johansson et al. 2017). It is well established that people make use of art objects, commodities and commodity signs, personal possessions and office space, technological apparatus, subscriptions to professional journals, and anthems and flags in order

to claim, articulate and project desired identities (Callero 2003; Cerulo 1997; Shankar *et al.* 2006). Other research elaborates how the corporeal body can be shaped, marked and coloured through the use of cosmetics, cosmetic and gender reassignment surgery, body art such as tattoos and piercings and the adoption of particular hairstyles, beards and moustaches (Norton 1997; Phelan and Hunt 1998). Aslan (2016) has analysed how artifacts (e.g., costumes, make-up, music) are employed by live-statue street performers to mediate the affective content and impact of their identity performances. Considerable attention has been paid to attire, e.g., shirts, skirts, name tags and jewellery, and its role in communicating professional (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997), gender (de Beauvoir 1975 [1949]), and religious (Humphreys and Brown 2002b) identities, and also their camouflage (Rosen 1985, p. 34).

*Identification.* Symbolic organizational identification is enacted through perceptible choices of object symbols. These displays are often carefully controlled by actors very much aware that these are long-duration, high visibility enactments of identification. Casey (1995) and Kunda (1992) both describe individuals whose office spaces were adorned with company posters, slogans, photographs, trophies, coffee mugs, toys, ribbons, tags and other paraphernalia with corporate logos emblazoned upon them, and whose cars carried bumper stickers professing ‘love’ for their organization. In an architecture firm, depictions of company projects and three-dimensional models were found by Vough (2012) to be present in all meeting rooms, draped across desks, and sitting on most surfaces. These trappings serve both as extensions of individuals’ identities, and as statements of their frequently strong and positive identification with organizations; though for every display of commitment and loyalty, there are others who employ corporate artifacts creatively to enact dis-identification (Fleming and Spicer 2003). There is, moreover, a dynamic component to these enactments: posters can be taken down or

amended with graffiti; corporate artifacts of all kinds can be treated with reverence or disdain in people's work on their relationships to organizations.

Most attention has centred on actors' choice of clothes and other bodily adornments which can be especially potent object symbols (Trice and Beyer 1993, p. 86) and also peculiarly visible and malleable. It is well established that professionals such as doctors (Pratt *et al.* 2006), nurses (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997), and priests (Kreiner *et al.* 2006) not only display but enact identification with their profession by wearing specialist attire. As an Episcopal priest in the study by Kreiner *et al.* (2006a) said: 'I put on the vestments and that made me a priest from the outside in' (p. 1050). Karreman and Alvesson describe how in a multinational consulting group employees enacted identification by conforming to informal norms which prescribed dressing in dark suits and carrying briefcases. Humphreys and Brown (2002b) report how in a Turkish university female faculty members chose to wear Western dress, and not to wear a headscarf, to enact their allegiance to Ataturk and their identification with a particular, Westernized, understanding of their institution. Complementarily, employees may also subvert organizational dress codes, by wearing non-standard shoes, an extra piece of jewellery or a different shade of make-up in order to establish their less than total identification with their organization (Hochschild 1983).

### *Socio-cognitive*

*Identity work.* This approach regards identity work as conducted through the operation of an assortment of cognitive (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Oakes, *et al.* 1994; Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1986) and sensemaking (Haslam 2004; Vough and Caza 2017; Weick 1979) processes. One strand of theorizing associated with SIT/SCT posits that identification may occur without any identity work on the part of individuals: 'To identify, an individual need not expend effort

toward the group's goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group' (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p. 21). Other scholars, however, have emphasized that individuals' identification with organizations occurs as a result of people's active processes of meaning abstraction from social stimuli, their seeking of affiliation and their attempts to maintain or bolster self-esteem (Oakes *et. al.* 1994). This in part explains why organizational identification is affected by, for example, processes of socialization, symbolic management, and charismatic leaders, all of which/whom shape people's understandings and emotions.

*Identification.* For (at least some) SIT/SCT scholars, identification is enacted through socio-cognitive processes, such as 'categorization', 'depersonalization', and 'social comparison' which involve active choice making (Curchod *et al.* 2014; Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Categorization occurs as individuals allocate people, including themselves, into social categories, and 'we select which categories to use out of many possibilities' (Oakes and Turner 1990, p. 121). Categorizing one's self as a participant in an organization leads to perceived similarity to other members through processes referred to as depersonalization. Social comparison occurs as people compare themselves with others on the basis of their memberships of particular social categories, processes which have affective, evaluative, and behavioural accompaniments (van Dick *et al.* 2004). It is increasingly recognized that these processes are enacted continuously, that few understandings and preferences are stable, all are subject to question and to doubt, and that their consequences are rarely clear-cut. Although participants may tend to define their selves in terms of the same attributes as those they perceive in their organizations, these self-definitions are always (potentially) in flux and subject to revision, often ambiguous, and evolve continually in response to on-going interactions, changing

circumstances, and unfolding events (e.g., Haslam 2004; Haslam *et al.* 2004; Hogg and Terry 2001; Rijswijk, Haslam, and Ellemers 2006; van Dick *et al.* 2004).

Another strand of theorizing suggests that organizational identification is enacted through interlocking processes of sensebreaking (the fundamental questioning of who one is), sensegiving (organizational guiding of the meaning construction of others), and sensemaking (in this context, coming to an understanding of the self) (Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Pratt 1998; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006). Substantial research has focused on how processes of self-construction involve people taking stock, assessing, interpreting, reflecting upon, and trialling versions of who they are as they seek to enact preferred identities (Ibarra 1999). Studies illustrate how individuals' strong positive identification with a millenarian cult (Lofland and Stark 1965) and corporations (Ezzamel *et al.* 2001) occurs through processes of - to some extent coerced - interpretation, understanding and acceptance of key organizational precepts. Kanter (1968) analyses how individuals in utopian communities make sense of the world in ideological terms, surrendering themselves through processes of 'institutionalized awe' (p. 514) such that each member '...exchanges a private identity for one provided by the organization' (p. 510). Other extreme cases of co-opted sensemaking leading to intense forms of identification have been documented in the military (Thornborrow and Brown 2009), concentration camps (Abel 1951), and other total institutions (Goffman 1961). Some research has identified specific sensemaking-identification tactics such as 'familiarity', 'similarity', 'benefits' and 'investment' (Vough 2012) and broader sets of processes in the form of 'affinity' and 'emulation' (Pratt 1998). Sensemaking processes, though, are not conducted unthinkingly (Weick 1979), and can as easily lead to 'cognitive distancing' (Kunda 1992, p. 178), weak, schizo, and dis-identification.



### *Psychodynamic*

*Identity work.* A very different stream of theorizing, which is also highly differentiated, draws on the work of, for example, Freud, Jung, Adler and Klein to analyse the psychodynamic processes of individual (and sometimes collective) identity work (A. Freud 1936; S. Freud 1922; Schwartz 1987a,b). These studies show how identity work, in the form of ego defences such as fantasy, denial and rationalization, functions automatically and unconsciously to mitigate people's anxieties, resolve conflicts, and maintain self-esteem<sup>vi</sup> (Brown and Starkey 2000; Gabriel 2000; Hoyer and Steyaert 2015). Petriglieri and Stein (2012), for example, analyse the Gucci family to show how leaders may deal with unwanted versions of their selves through processes of projective identification, 'splitting off' undesirable understandings of who they are and projecting them onto others. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996, p. 119), argue that much identity work is habitual and prone to 'slip beneath conscious awareness'. A distinct branch of research drawing inspiration from Lacan (1977a,b), denies that identity exists as a definable object and positions identity work as necessarily doomed efforts to deal with our inability to know ourselves (cf. Bloom 2016; Harding 2007; Kenny 2012). As Driver (2009, p. 499), drawing on the work of Lacan, observes: it is a 'shared fantasy that identity exists as a definable object and can be articulated in a coherent story' (cf. Driver 2015).

*Identification.* Much interpretive identification research provides insight on the psychodynamic production and maintenance of the self in organizational contexts (Frayer and Gabriel 2014; Gabriel 2000; Hoyer and Steyaert 2015; Vince and Broussine 1996). In the Hephaestus organization employees 'unconsciously recognize that it is in their psychic interests to believe in and belong to the team' (Casey 1995, p. 150), and resort to both fantasy and denial in order to mitigate anxieties and contain feelings of guilt and ambivalence. At Amway, identification is enacted through processes of continuous dream-building which involve elaborating and

sustaining fantasies of future wealth (Pratt 2000). In managing their professional identification, Episcopal priests engage in the defense mechanism ‘projective identification’ which involves splitting off aspects of their selves that they deem undesirable and projecting them onto other priests (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006a). Kanter (1968) analyses how, in utopian cults, strong in-group identification is enacted through the collective sharing of a sense of persecution which heightens group values, vaccinating them from attack by strengthening communal ego defenses. Other studies, such as Hochschild’s (1983) analysis of flight attendants’ difficulties in locating the ‘real me’ in the performance of their organizational roles, hint at more profound processes of self-examination that accompany organizational identification.

Probably the best known explanation for how psychodynamic identity work enacts strong positive organizational identification has been provided by Schwartz (1987a,b), who argues that it occurs as people fuse their personal ego ideal with idealized understandings of the collective, such that ‘...the organization represents a project for the return to narcissism’ (p. 43) and the avoidance of anxieties regarding mortality. Moreover, in what Schwartz (1987a) refers to as the ‘totalitarian’ organization, ‘productive work comes to be less important than the maintenance of narcissistic fantasy’ (p. 52), sometimes, as at NASA, with disastrous consequences (Schwartz 1987b). Other commentators have sought to analyse the psychodynamics of dis- and more ambivalent forms of identification. Gabriel (2012) uses the concept of ‘miasma’ to analyse how participants in organizations may come to regard them with a profound sense of loss, a lack of interest and an expectation of punishment. Relatedly, Stein (1998, 2001) describes how organizational initiatives such as ‘downsizing’ and ‘re-engineering’ may defile the spirits of those subject to them, and how the notional ‘logics of markets’ do psychological violence to employees. This theorizing connects psychodynamic processes centred on loss, mourning and fantasy to particular forms of dis-identification in

which individuals forego resistance and instead suffer guilt, shame and feelings of inadequacy: ‘...people lose their confidence and self-esteem, moral integrity evaporates’ (Gabriel 2012, p. 1147).

To summarize, I have analysed five approaches to identity work and organizational identification. While for simplicity these have been discussed separately, they are, arguably, best understood not just as intimately linked and to some extent overlapping, but as collectively constituting a particular ‘perspective’ on identity processes. As it is, in extant literature scholars have mostly adopted a single approach, in part because of the complexity inherent in seeking to account adequately for multiple and only partially distinct processes and forms, but also because of entrenched ideological assumptions. Exceptions have mainly been ethnographies and in-depth case studies of work organizations which touch on a broad range of phenomena, though generally without recognizing them as complementary (e.g. Casey 1995; Hochschild 1983; Kreiner *et al.* 2006a; Kunda 1992). Cognizance that these approaches are aspects of a broad perspective on identities in organizations that (with the exception of underlying psychodynamic mechanisms) ‘emphasizes work as purposeful effort by actors to affect some social-symbolic aspect of their context’ (Phillips and Lawrence 2012, p. 226) is useful because it allows us better to appreciate their commonalities and potential synergies, not merely their disjunctures and differences. In particular, it encourages recognition of how each approach is as much concerned with embedded actors and their actions as they are the outcomes of those actions.

While identity and identification are frequently described as ‘root constructs in organizational phenomena’ (Albert, *et al.* 2000, p.13), yet the five approaches to their study have attracted quite different levels of attention from scholars in business and management. Very considerable

research efforts have been lavished on discourse and identities/identification, and a substantial community has produced a vast number of studies using SIT/SCT. Fewer projects have been conducted using focused dramaturgical and symbolic approaches. This means, for example, that extant ‘research rarely highlights how bodies can serve as the fulcrum of identity work’ and thus ‘the body/identity nexus is a relatively underexplored topic’ (Courpasson and Monties 2016, p. 35; Clarke and Knights 2017). Least well represented in the literature are psychodynamic studies of identity work and identification, perhaps because of the difficulties inherent in applying this approach together with the relatively small size of the psychodynamics-oriented community.

## **Discussion**

Drawing on an established and burgeoning social scientific tradition that has defined identity work and organizational identification as ‘an active process’ (Cheney 1983, p. 342; Goffman 1990 [1959]) I have reviewed scholarship which explores how individuals position themselves with respect to their organizations using discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive and psychodynamic approaches. Recognition of these distinct approaches to identity work and organizational identification is useful because it shows scholars how to capture more of the nexus of relationships that people have with their groups, organizations and professions. My analysis partially contradicts other commentaries on the organizational identification literature which claim that there are a ‘lack of studies investigating process issues’ (Miscenko and Day 2016, p. 231), revealing this to be true only of a certain subset of work associated with SIT/SCT. In this section, I briefly consider a range of (i) theory driven, (ii) empirical and (iii) methodological issues raised by this review and some indicative questions for further research associated with them.

### *Theoretical Issues*

(i) *Distinguishing between identity work and organizational identification.* Although there is evidently considerable conceptual overlap between some conceptions of identity work and organizational identification, they are not wholly coextensive. Indeed, there are those who suggest identification can occur without any effort (work) on the part of individuals, implying that identity work and organizational identification are wholly distinct concepts (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Others point out that much identity work is undertaken by individuals for purposes unrelated to identification, for instance that which relates to their personal identities and their families. One seemingly felicitous option - implicit in the logic of this review - is to regard 'worked on' processes of identification as a subcategory of identity work that refers specifically to those means by which individuals constitute themselves with respect to social categories (perhaps best termed 'identification work').

(ii) *Recognizing different approaches to identity work/identification.* My analysis permits greater clarity regarding the multiple practices and processes that have until now been bundled-up in the organizational identification literature. This is important in the context of a mainstream social psychology literature that focuses on SIT/SCT to the exclusion of other marginalized (and often similarly insular) discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic and psychodynamic literatures. Some of the many questions for further research this review prompts include: can studies of identity work and organizational identification which deliberately employ two or more of these approaches in tandem stimulate additional insights on identity and identification dynamics? Do some combinations of these approaches work better to elicit certain research findings than others? As the literature on identity work/organizational identification develops it will be interesting to observe whether

researchers wedded to one approach will in fact be tempted to branch out and reconsider their data using other intellectual resources.

Recognition of distinctive approaches to organizational identification allows us to appreciate the different understandings of what is meant by this phrase, often only implied or minimally defined by scholars, which exist in the identities literature (see table 1). Teasing out these distinct conceptions of identity work and organizational identification is, of course, only a first step, and raises many questions for research. While none of these definitions/approaches is intrinsically more valuable than any other, nevertheless, we may wonder whether some are better suited to address particular topics or specific research questions than others. Which permit the most interesting and insightful studies of how identifications alter over time? Do some of these conceptions allow researchers more scope for accounting adequately for how contexts - different organizations, industries, cultures etc. - affect identity work and organizational identification processes? How might these multiple approaches best be used to explore how and why people become strong, weak, schizo-, neutral etc. identifiers with their organizations? Which permit the most fecund multi-level research?

(iii) *'Real' and 'fake' identifications.* A key issue for some scholars is how to assess the 'veracity' of what *seem* to be - in particular discursive, dramaturgical and symbolic - enactments of identification (cf. Tracy and Trethewey 2005). Hewlin (2003, p. 634) crystallizes this difficulty using the concept of 'facades of conformity' to refer to *'false representations created by employees to appear as if they embrace organizational values'* [italics in original] (see also Schlenker 1980). The 'realities' of people and organizations are fraught with ambiguity: faked smiles are still smiles and, arguably, enact a (weak) form of identification, feigned support may be mistaken by others as genuine, and we may even fool ourselves. In

short, there is no secure knowledge in matters of identification, even if ultimate un-knowability does not preclude refined theorization, the precise forms of which must necessarily differ between approaches. For example, from a dramaturgical approach, potentially useful in this respect is Goffman's (1990 [1959]) distinction between 'surface acting', a self-consciously managed display, and 'deep acting', where actors play their roles 'naturally' and 'spontaneously'. As organizations are populated merely by actors playing roles in this approach, it is a mistake to think that it is possible to distinguish meaningfully between genuinely and non-genuinely 'felt' enactments of organizational identification. The self is 'a performed character', and there are no 'true' or 'false' performances of the self, only those which are more or less convincing or credible (Goffman 1990 [1959], p. 245).

(iv) *Agency/structure debates*. A further set of debates focuses on whether identities and identifications are chosen by resourceful and autonomous beings or ascribed to individuals by historical forces and institutional structures (e.g., Foucault 1982; Webb, 2006). Some research suggests that identification processes are wholly or mostly a matter of personal choice and that people are able to recreate themselves perpetually, as fluctuations in networks of relationships (Gergen 1991). Others contend that attempts to secure the self are necessarily self-defeating, serving only to reproduce the conceit that we are unique and autonomous individuals in the face of quotidian insecurity and, ultimately, death and decay (Becker 1969; Clarke and Knights 2017; Watts 1973). A further strand of theorizing argues that identity work is imprisoned in 'spheres of prescribed action and expectation' (Cerulo 1997, p. 388), and a considerable literature has developed which analyses how organizations 'regulate' the identities of members (Boussebaa and Brown 2016; Covalleski *et al.* 1998; Endrissat, 2016; Gill 2015; Koppman *et al.* 2016).

A majority of researchers, however, acknowledge that identities are neither simply chosen nor merely allocated. For the most part, people are not unthinking ‘cultural dopes’, but nor do they choose unconstrained the contexts in which their identity work takes place or the influences which shape their preferred self-understandings. Organizational identification needs to be recognized as arising in a continuing dialectic of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, and as ‘improvised’ or ‘crafted’ through processes which may be calculative or sub-conscious, are mostly pragmatic, often emotionally charged, and generally social (e.g. Knights and Clarke 2014). Additional conceptual research is required to assess whether studies conducted using the different approaches yield different answers. For example, it may be that discursive, dramaturgical and symbolic scholarship is more likely to emphasize individual choice in matters of identity and identification, while SCT/SIT and psychodynamic approaches highlight the extent to which people are prisoners of their psychology.

### *Empirical Issues*

(v) *The fluidity of identifications.* Traditionally, social psychologists have argued that people in organizations require ‘a relatively secure and stable’ understanding of their selves in order to function effectively (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, p. 417). As I have shown, however, there is growing recognition of the fluidity of organizational identifications. Indeed, some mainstream social psychologists have long recognized that working self-concepts are sufficiently supple to permit dynamic responses to changeable situations, and that identifications can be acquired, lost, switched or modified quickly, as contexts and preferences alter (Markus and Nurius 1986). Other theorists, some with postmodern inclinations, go further still and maintain that if there is a self-concept, then it is either extremely or infinitely plastic (Gergen 1972), that identities are projects not achievements (Garsten and Grey 1997; Grey 1994; Watson 2008), and are reassembled continuously through identity work processes



(Alvesson *et al.* 2008; Webb 2006; Ybema *et al.* 2009). As this review illustrates, organizational identification is a shorthand expression for what are most often problematic, disjointed, and fluctuating processes of identity-making (Ashcraft and Mumby 2003; Thomas and Davies 2005). Further research which explores issues of fluidity from different perspectives may cast new light on the different factors that influence the viscosity of people's identifications.

Recognition that identities and identifications are dynamic has led some researchers to draw on the concept of liminality to explain how people transition between roles and other social categories. Initially developed by van Gennep (1909/1960) the term is most usually used to denote a temporary condition of ambiguity in which an individual is caught 'betwixt and between' as s/he shifts from one social status to another (Beech 2011; Garsten 1999). Others have argued that (at least some) people may be better regarded as 'perpetual liminars' (Ybema *et al.* 2011, p.24) surfing continuously between jobs, roles, tasks and even careers (Borg and Soderlund 2015; Johnsen and Sørensen 2015). In this theorising, ongoing processes of identity work create liminal identities and identifications (whether transitional or permanent). Understanding of how these liminal identities and identifications are constructed, maintained, repaired and discarded over space and time through discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive and psychodynamic forms of work is, though, still inchoate, and may be another fruitful topic for scholarly inquiry.

(vi) *The fractured nature of organizational identification.* It is often recognized that identifications with organizations are rarely likely to be 'all-or-nothing' enactments, in part because in the continuing construal of liquid selves so many different and possibly contradictory processes are in-play simultaneously (Bauman 2000). Selves are rarely cohesive

but instead incorporate ‘meaning-giving tensions’ (Beech 2008, p. 71), and may be cracked and fissured (Lawler 2008, p. 145): self-doubt, uncertainty, fragility, and variability are, after all, aspects of our humanity (Collinson 2003). Recognition that people are able to deploy contradictory identities in the same social interaction has led to research on the incidence, impact, and management of role identity conflicts, such as those between professional and organization-based identities (Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari 2015; Simpson and Carroll 2008). Others have commented on how hybrid, (Lok 2010), hypocritical (Brunsson 1989), paradoxical (Ahuja *et al.* 2017; Cugansan 2016) and antagonistic (Clarke *et al.* 2009) identities may in fact be long-term solutions which enable people to cope effectively with equivocal and inconsistent demands. Employees’ identifications with their organization similarly are most often hesitant, confused and uncertain, and what they say, how they behave, the attire they choose and how they think etc. about their organizations is rarely consistent. Consider also the arguments that people may be conflicted, self-deceiving, insincere, or disordered, and that their preferences are often discovered in-the-moment. A few sample questions such issues evoke include: how do these considerations influence people’s ritualized performances of self? What does the fractured nature of identities mean for people’s choice of object symbols to declare their identities? How (if at all) can the different approaches account adequately for self-deception and inconsistent preferences in matters of identification?

(vii) *Multiple organizational identifications.* Understanding that identities are temporary and fractured aligns with long-standing views that people work on multiple identities (Mead 1934), and has led organizational identification researchers to recognize that people do not have just one clear relationship with their organization. A sociological literature on identities relating to nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, (dis)ability, space, social movements, roles, and the intersections between them (Howard 2000), has been complemented by studies on various

organizational, managerial, professional, generational and occupational identities (Fauchart and Gruber 2011). Distinctions are made between selves which are past, present and future (McAdams 1993), possible (Markus and Nurius 1986), ideal/ought (Gecas 1982), provisional (Ibarra 1999), aspirational (Thornborrow and Brown 2009), alternate (Obodaru 2012) and phronetic (Bardon *et al.* 2017). For the organizational identification literature this suggests that different versions of the self may have different relationships with the organization, all of which may themselves be somewhat permeable, malleable and fuzzy (Kreiner *et al.* 2006b): for instance, not only might historical, current and aspirational selves exhibit different patterns of identification, but people can also harbour various substitute selves, keeping open a broad portfolio of identification options (cf. Gergen (1991) on multiphrenia, the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments).

(xiii) *The dark side of identification.* While ‘all but a tiny fraction of studies on identification focus on the positive consequences’ (Ashforth 2016, p.367), this is less true for research on identity work, much of which recognizes that the identities managers and workers are encouraged institutionally to construct serve questionable organizational objectives (Fleming and Spicer 2003; Thornborrow and Brown 2009). ‘Overidentification’, defined by Anzani *et al.* (2012, p.290) as ‘an excessive form of identification’, and overly exclusive identification which renders people ‘myopic in that it offers only a single perspective’ (Ashforth 2016, p.367), have been associated with negative outcomes such as workaholism (Avanzi *et al.* 2012), unethical behaviours (Leavitt and Sluss 2015) and resistance to change (Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2003). An identity work perspective, however, which involves recognition that identifications are continually worked-on and involve multiple overlapping and interrelated processes, combined with an injunction to take context fully into account, opens up diverse avenues for research on unsavoury aspects of identification work. It invites scholars to focus

on, in particular, (i) the multiple means by which people are invited, cajoled and deceived into identifying with organizations that (arguably) do not serve their individual interests or those of society; and (ii) the processes by which individuals' identifications are translated into immoral and/or illicit actions on behalf of their organizations. The scope for further research is considerable indeed.

### *Methods Issues*

#### *(ix) Methods for research*

Recognition, and perhaps adoption, of multiple approaches to identity work/organizational identification requires requisitely complex means for their research. While scholarship using SIT/SCT tends to favour experimental and survey techniques, other approaches lend themselves to interpretive methodologies using mainly, though not necessarily exclusively, qualitative methods. Such means are, perhaps, better suited to problematizing assumptions prevalent in the literature regarding the self-contained and putatively resilient nature of selves, and focusing attention on people in organizations as embodied and psychologically complex (Clarke and Knights 2017).

Discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, sensemaking and psychodynamic processes are not easily tractable using hypothesis-testing research designs and quantitative methods. Emic, ideographic studies are better suited to exploring organizational identification phenomena that a processual approach suggests are often highly contextual and nonlinear. This is in part because interpretive research tends to be less heavily 'templated', more open, flexible, and adaptable to local situations, subjects and researchers than experimental approaches. Ethnographic, autoethnographic and in-depth case studies using not just interviews, observations, and participant observations but diaries, photographic and video materials,

biographies, and other documentary methods can assist greatly in the investigation of identification processes that are intensely personal, and temporally unstable (Humphreys 2005). These are the means required to get closer to an individual's point of view, and also lend themselves to unravelling multifaceted issues centred on, for example, emotions and temporality in the context of identity work and identification. The employment of these methods to expand the regime of truth associated with organizational identification scholarship may thus better assist efforts to author 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) and to discover richness, depth, pluralism, and simultaneity as well as sequentiality.

## **Future Prospects**

While others have argued for the integration of different streams of work on identity and identification 'into a unified framework' (Miscenko and Day 2016, p.237) I have suggested that the different approaches reviewed here are better regarded as a 'perspective' unified by focal concerns with agency and processual issues. My theorizing is important because it draws together a broad range of mostly independently occurring conversations on identity work and organizational identification and attempts to kick-start new debates on processes of identification work. Importantly, I have sought neither to denigrate nor to endorse any of the approaches reviewed here, only to remind us, as Burke (1965, p. 49) has argued, that 'every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing'. The arguments presented here constitute an attempt to foster unconventional insight into phenomena that are often regarded as well understood in order both to see things differently and to 'maximise what we see' (Weick 1987, p. 122). Identities and identifications are beguilingly familiar, and their significance in explanations of organizational processes and outcomes requires us continually to re-evaluate what we think we know so as to mitigate complacency and provoke novel insight.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Research projects do not stand alone. This project is one of several identity-related studies that I have conducted over the past decade, and these other endeavours have also shaped this review.

<sup>ii</sup> Thus the total number of papers initially selected for analysis was 2384+203+241=2828. Additional references recommended by the reviewers have also been incorporated into this review. While the date range of the material cited in this review is 1922-2017 older literature is generally located in the broader social sciences. The business and management literature on identities in organizations dates mostly from the 1990s, with a notable increase in volume since 2000 which seems set to continue.

<sup>iii</sup> Numerous other terms have been used to qualify the phrase 'organizational identification' which (at least partially) overlap these reasonably established categories, such as 'ambivalent', 'conflicted', and 'ambiguous' (Hoyer, 2016).

<sup>iv</sup> Much of what Goffman and others refer to as 'dramaturgy' typically involves processes I consider under the category headings 'discursive identity work' and 'symbolic identity work'. My argument is that, in principle at least, it is important to distinguish between physical actions, discursive actions, and the tactical and strategic use of object symbols so that we can appreciate better the diversity of identity work processes engaged in by individuals and groups in organizations.

<sup>v</sup> Dramaturgical identity work is conducted in relation to others and these others may help define an individual through their treatment of him/her, for example by excluding that person from a social function (Srinivas, 2013, p.1662).

<sup>vi</sup> While they may be engaged in unconsciously, psychodynamic processes often give rise to elaborate fantasies, denials, rationalizations etc. that are (more) deliberately worked on.